



Ordinary Courage

**The Revolutionary
War Adventures of
Joseph Plumb Martin**

**Edited by
James Kirby Martin**

Brandywine Press

NARRATIVE
of some of the
ADVENTURES, DANGERS AND SUFFERINGS
of a
REVOLUTIONARY SOLDIER;
interspersed with
Anecdotes of Incidents that Occurred within his
own Observation

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF
[Joseph Plumb Martin]

"Long sleepless nights in heavy arms I've stood;
And spent laborious days in dust and blood."
Pope's Homer

PREFACE

I have somewhere read of a limner, who, when he had daubed a representation of some animal, was always compelled, for the information of the observer, to write under it what he intended it to represent: As, "this is a goose, this is a dog," &c. So, many books, and mine in particular among the rest, would perhaps be quite unintelligible as to the drift of them, unless the reader was informed beforehand what the author intended.

I shall, therefore, by way of preface, inform the reader that my intention is to give a succinct account of some of my adventures, dangers, and sufferings during my several campaigns in the Revolutionary army. My readers (who, by the by, will, I hope, none of them be beyond the pale of my own neighborhood) must not expect any great transactions to be exhibited to their notice. "No alpine wonders thunder through my tale," but they are here, once for all, requested to bear it in mind, that they are not the achievements of an officer of high grade which they are perusing, but the common transactions of one of the lowest in station in an army, a private soldier.

Should the reader chance to ask himself this question (and I think it very natural for him to do so) how could any man of common sense ever spend his precious time in writing such a rhapsody of nonsense? To satisfy his inquiring mind, I would inform him, that, as the adage says, "every crow thinks her own young the whitest," so every private soldier in an army thinks his particular services as essential to carry on the war he is engaged in, as the services of the most influential general: And why not? What could officers do without such men? Nothing at all. Alexander never could have conquered the world without private soldiers.

But, says the reader, this is low; the author gives us nothing but ev-

everyday occurrences; I could tell as good a story myself. Very true, Mr. Reader, everyone can tell what he has done in his lifetime, but everyone has not been a soldier, and consequently can know but little or nothing of the sufferings and fatigues incident to an army. All know everyday occurrences, but few know the hardships of the "tented field." I wish to have a better opinion of my readers, whoever they may be, than even to think that any of them would wish me to stretch the truth to furnish them with wonders that I never saw, or acts or deeds I never performed. I can give them no more than I have to give, and if they are dissatisfied after all, I must say I am sorry for them and myself too; for them, that they expect more than I can do, and myself, that I am so unlucky as not to have it in my power to please them. . . .

The critical grammarian may find enough to feed his spleen upon if he peruses the following pages; but I can inform him beforehand, I do not regard his sneers; if I cannot write grammatically, I can think, talk, and feel like other men. Besides, if the common readers can understand it, it is all I desire; and to give them an idea, though but a faint one, of what the army suffered that gained and secured our independence, is all I wish. I never studied grammar an hour in my life. When I ought to have been doing that, I was forced to be studying the rules and articles of war. . . .

A note of interrogation: Why we were made to suffer so much in so good and just a cause; and a note of admiration to all the world, that an army voluntarily engaged to serve their country, when starved, and naked, and suffering everything short of death (and thousands even that), should be able to persevere through an eight years war, and come off conquerors at last!

But lest I should make my preface longer than my story, I will here bring it to a close.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTORY

*Have patience just to hear me out;
And I'll tell you what I've been about.*

The heroes of all Histories, Narratives, Adventures, Novels, and Romances have, or are supposed to have ancestors, or some root from which they sprang. I conclude, then, that it is not altogether inconsistent to suppose that I had parents too. I shall not undertake to trace my pedigree (like the Welsh) some thousand years beyond the creation; but just observe that my father was the son of a "substantial New England farmer," (as we Yankees say) in the then colony, but now state of Connecticut, and county of Windham. When my father arrived at puberty he found his constitution too feeble to endure manual labor; he therefore directed his views to gaining a livelihood by some other means. He, accordingly, fitted himself for and entered as a student in Yale College, some time between the years 1750 and '55.

My mother was likewise a "farmer's daughter"; her native place was in the county of New Haven, in the same state. She had a sister, married and settled in the vicinity of the college, who often boarded the students when sick. My father being once in that condition, and being at board at this aunt's, my mother happened to be there on a visit: My father seeing her, it seems, like a great many others in like circumstances, took a fancy to her, followed up his courtship, and very possibly obtained her consent as well as her parents—married her a year and a half before his collegial studies were ended, which (if known at the time) would have been cause of his expulsion from college; but it seems it never was known there, and he, of course, escaped a keelhauling.

After my father left college, he studied divinity, had "a call," accepted it, and was settled in the county of Berkshire, in the (now) Commonwealth of Massachusetts, as a gospel minister of the Congregational order; in which county of Berkshire, I, the redoubtable hero of this Nar-

native, first made my appearance in this crooked, fretful world, upon the 21st day of November in the year 1760. I have been told that the day on which I was born was a thanksgiving day, which day is, generally, celebrated with good cheer. One might have thought it a little ominous being born on such a day, but I can assure the reader it was no omen of good to me, especially for the seven or eight years I was in the army—nor, indeed, ever since.

My grandsire, on my mother's side, having at this time no other daughter but my mother (my aunt, mentioned above being dead), she of course became the darling, for which reason, I suppose, I was his favorite grandson and received his Christian and surnames as my given name.

I lived with my parents until I was upwards of seven years old, when I went to live with this good old grandsire; for good he was, particularly to me. He was wealthy, and I had everything that was necessary for life, and as many superfluities as was consistent with my age and station. There were none belonging to the family, as constant residents, except the old gentleman, lady, and myself. It is true my grandsire kept me pretty busily employed, but he was kind to me in every respect, always gave me a playday when convenient, and was indulgent to me almost to a fault. Ah! I ought not to have left him while he lived; I fouled my own nest most sadly when I did it; but children "are full of notions."

I remember the stir in the country occasioned by the Stamp Act, but I was so young that I did not understand the meaning of it; I likewise remember the disturbances that followed the repeal of the Stamp Act, until the destruction of the tea at Boston and elsewhere. I was then 13 or 14 years old and began to understand something of the works going on. I used . . . to inquire a deal about the French War, as it was called, which had not been long ended; my grandsire would talk with me about it while working in the fields, perhaps as much to beguile his own time as to gratify my curiosity. I thought then, nothing should induce me to get caught in the toils of an army. "I am well, so I'll keep," was my motto then, and it would have been well for me if I had ever retained it.

Time passed smoothly on with me till the year 1774 arrived. The smell of war began to be pretty strong, but I was determined to have no hand in it, happen when it might; I felt myself to be a real coward. What—venture my carcass where bullets fly! That will never do for me. Stay at home out of harm's way, thought I, it will be as much to your health as credit to do so. But the pinch of the game had not arrived yet; I had seen nothing of war affairs, and consequently was but a poor judge in such matters.

One little circumstance that happened in the autumn of this year will exhibit my military prowess, at this time, in a high point of view. In

the afternoon, one Sabbath day, while the people were assembled at meeting, word was brought that the British (regulars, as the good people then called them) were advancing from Boston, spreading death and desolation in their route in every direction. What was the intent of spreading this rumor, I know not, unless it was to see how the people would stand affected; be it what it would, it caused me a terrible fright.¹ I went out of the house in the dusk of the evening, when I heard the sound of a carriage on the road in the direction of Boston. I thought they were coming as sure as a gun; I shall be dead or a captive before tomorrow morning. However, I went to bed late in the evening, dreamed of "fire and sword," I suppose, waked in the morning, found myself alive, and the house standing just where it did the evening before.

The winter of this year passed off without any very frightening alarms, and the spring of 1775 arrived. Expectation of some fatal event seemed to fill the minds of most of the considerate people throughout the country. I was ploughing in the field about half a mile from home, about the 21st day of April, when all of a sudden the bells fell to ringing and three guns were repeatedly fired in succession down in the village; what the cause was we could not conjecture. I had some fearful forebodings that something more than the sound of a carriage wheel was in the wind. The regulars are coming in good earnest, thought I.

My grandsire sighed, he "smelt the rat." He immediately turned out the team and repaired homeward. I set off to see what the cause of the commotion was. I found most of the male kind of the people together; soldiers for Boston were in requisition. A dollar deposited upon the drumhead was taken up by someone as soon as placed there and the holder's name taken, and he enrolled with orders to equip himself as quick as possible. My spirits began to revive at the sight of the money offered; the seeds of courage began to sprout; for, contrary to my knowledge, there was a scattering of them sowed, but they had not as yet germinated; I felt a strong inclination, when I found I had them, to cultivate them. O, thought I, if I were but old enough to put myself forward, I would be the possessor of one dollar, the dangers of war to the contrary notwithstanding; but I durst not put myself up for a soldier for fear of being refused, and that would have quite upset all the courage I had drawn forth.

The men that had engaged "to go to war" went as far as the next

¹The story was only partially rumor. British regulars did indeed advance from Boston on September 1, 1774, to seize patriot artillery at Cambridge and a public store of gunpowder at Charlestown. Local citizens threatened armed resistance but did not engage the regulars. Still, word spread widely of a bloody encounter, causing some New Englanders to rush momentarily to arms.

town, where they received orders to return, as there was a sufficiency of men already engaged, so that I should have had but a short campaign had I have gone.

This year there were troops raised both for Boston and New York. Some from the back towns were billeted at my grandsire's; their company and conversation began to warm my courage to such a degree that I resolved at all events to "go a sogering."² Accordingly, I used to pump my grandsire in a roundabout manner to know how he stood affected respecting it. For a long time he appeared to take but little notice of it. At length, one day I pushed the matter so hard upon him, he was compelled to give me a direct answer, which was that he should never give his consent for me to go into the army unless I had the previous consent of my parents. And now I was completely graveled [perplexed]; my parents were too far off to obtain their consent before it would be too late for the present campaign. What was I to do? Why, I must give up the idea, and that was hard; for I was as earnest now to call myself, and be called a soldier, as I had been a year before *not* to be called one. I thought over many things and formed many plans, but they all fell through, and poor disconsolate I was forced to sit down and gnaw my fingernails in silence.

I said but little more about "soldiering" until the troops raised in and near the town in which I resided came to march off for New York. Then I felt bitterly again; I accompanied them as far as the town line, and it was hard parting with them then. Many of my young associates were with them; my heart and soul went with them, but my mortal part must stay behind. By and by they will come swaggering back, thought I, and tell me of all their exploits, all their "hairbreadth 'scapes," and poor Huff will not have a single sentence to advance. O, that was too much to be borne with by me.

The thoughts of the service still haunted me after the troops were gone, and the town clear of them; but what plan to form to get the consent of all, parents and grandparents, that I might procure thereby to myself the (to me then) bewitching name of a soldier, I could not devise. Sometimes I thought I would enlist at all hazards, let the consequences be what they would; then again, I would think how kind my grandparents were to me, and ever had been, my grandsire in particular: I could not bear to hurt their feelings so much. I did sincerely love my grandsire; my grandma'am I did not love so well, and I feared her less. At length a

²In the wake of Lexington and Concord, patriot leaders in Massachusetts quickly called for troop support from other New England colonies. The Connecticut Assembly responded decisively before the end of April by ordering the formation of six regiments, each to enlist 1,000 soldiers, and added two more in July. The *rage militaire* was on, and in the summer and autumn of 1775, as observed by young Martin, it seemed as if everyone wanted to be a "soger."

thought struck my mind: Should they affront me grossly, I would make that a plea with my conscience to settle the controversy with. Accordingly, I wished nothing more than to have them, or either of them, give "His Honor" a high affront, that I might thereby form an excuse to engage in the service *without* their consent, leave, or approbation.

It happened that in the early part of the autumn of this year, I was gratified in my wishes; for I thought I had received provocation enough to justify me in engaging in the army during life, little thinking that I was inflicting the punishment on myself that I fancied I was laying on my grandparents for their (as I thought) willful obstinacy. And as this affair was one and the chief cause of my leaving those kind people and their hospitable house, and precipitating myself into an ocean of distress, I will minutely describe the affair.

My grandsire, as I have before observed, often gave me playdays, especially after the spring and fall sowing, when I went where I pleased, a gunning, or fishing, or to whatever recreation took my fancy. "This fall," said the old gentleman to me one day, "come, spring to it, and let us get the winter grain in as soon as possible, and you shall have a playday after the work is done." Accordingly, I did do the best I could to forward the business, and I believe I gave him satisfaction, for he repeated his promise to me often. Just before we had done sowing, I told him that all my young associates were going to New Haven to commencement this season.³ "Well," said he, "you shall go too, if you choose, and you shall have one of the horses; you shall have your choice of them, and I will give you some pocket money." . . .

My grandsire had a piece of salt marsh about three miles from home, which he had mowed three or four days before the day arrived which was to make me completely happy, at least for a time. Two days previous he sent me to rake up the hay; I buffeted heat and mosquitoes and got the hay all up; and as that sort of hay is not easily injured by the weather, I thought there was nothing to prevent my promised happiness.

Well, the day arrived. I got up early, did all the little jobs about the place, that my grandsire might have nothing to accuse me of. He had gone out during the morning and did not return till breakfast time. I was waiting with impatience for his coming in, that I might prepare for my excursion, when, lo, he did come—much to my sorrow; for the first words I heard were, "Come, get up the team, I have gotten such a one," naming a neighbor's boy somewhat older than myself, "to go with us and

³Yale College, founded in 1701, was the third oldest institution of higher learning in the colonies. The college held its annual commencement on the second Wednesday of each September. Although the graduation ceremony may have been solemn, much revelry surrounded the occasion, including everything from fireworks displays to town-and-gown fist-cuffs between students and the likes of Martin's young friends.

cart home the salt hay." Had thunder and lightning fallen upon the four corners of the house, it would not have struck me with worse feelings than these words of his did. Shame, grief, spite, revenge, all took immediate possession of me. What could I do; go I must, that was certain, there was no remedy; and go I did, but with a full determination that the old gentleman should know that I had feelings of some sort or other, let him think of me as he would.

I, according to his orders, prepared the team, he undertook to act teamster, and I set off before them for the marsh alone that I might indulge myself in my grief without molestation. The way to the marsh lay about a mile and a half on the highway to the college. I had hardly got into the highway before I was overtaken by a troop of my young mates, all rigged off for commencement, swaggering like nabobs. The first compliment was, "Hallo, where are you going? We thought you was one of the foremost in the party; your grandsire never intended to let you go, and you was a fool to believe him." I did not believe *them*; my grandsire had never deceived me in such circumstances before, and I was willing even then, vexed as I was, to attribute it to forgetfulness or to anything but willfulness. However, I . . . considered myself as much injured as though it had been done ever so designedly.

I, however, went to the marsh; my grandsire, team, and boy arrived soon after me. We put a load of hay upon the cart, and, as it was getting rather late in the day, the old gentleman concluded to go home with the team and left the other youngster and me to pole the rest of the hay off the marsh to the upland, as it was dangerous going upon the lower part of it, being in many places soft and miry. He told us to go to some of the fences and cut a pair of sassafras poles, those being light, and have the remainder of the hay in readiness by his return.

And now comes the catastrophe of the play. I concluded now was the time for me to show my spunk; we went up to the upland where was plenty of fruit; I lay down under an apple tree and fell to eating. The other boy ate too, but still urged me to obey my orders; I was resolved to disobey, let the consequences be what they would. However, he by his importunity at length got me down upon the marsh; we poled one cock [a small pile] of hay off the marsh, when we saw the old gentleman coming full drive, Jehu-like.⁴ Down he came, when lo and behold we had gotten one cock of hay only in a condition to be taken upon the cart; what was to be done. To go on to the marsh was dangerous in the extreme; to stop then to pole it off would not do; the time would not allow it.

O, my grandsire was in a woeful passion. I stood aloof. Whose fault

⁴Jehu was a king of Israel in the ninth century B.C. who was known for his furious driving of chariots. See II Kings 9:20.

was it, he inquired; the blame was quickly laid to my account, and justly too, for I was the only culprit. The old gentleman came at me hammer and tongs with his six-foot cartwhip. Ah, thought I to myself, good legs, do your duty now if ever; I houghed [hoofed] the gravel, or rather the marsh, in good earnest. There were 20 people or more near us at work; they all suspended their labor to see the race. But I was too light-footed for the old gentleman, and the people on the marsh setting up a laugh, it rather disconcerted him; he, however, chased me about 30 or 40 rods⁵ when he gave over the pursuit and returned. I ran as much further before I dared to look back; but hearing no sound of footsteps behind me, I at last ventured to look over my shoulder and saw him almost back to his team; I followed him in my turn, but not quite so nimble as I went from him. He endeavored to spit a little of his spite upon the other youngster, but he *stepped* up close to him so that he could not use his whip; and then pled his own cause so well that the old gentleman said no more to him.

He then had to venture upon the marsh at all events. I took a rake and raked after the cart, but took especial care to keep out of harm's way till the hay was all upon the cart. I was then called upon to help bind the load; I complied, but I kept on tiptoe all the time, ready to start in case I saw any symptoms of war; but all passed off. We got off the marsh safe and without any hindrance; and it was well for me, after all, that we met with no disaster.

And here ends my Introductory Chapter. If the reader thinks that some passages in it record incidents not altogether to my credit as a boy, I can tell him that I thought at the time I did right, and to tell the truth I have not materially altered my opinion respecting them since. One thing I am certain of and that is, reader, if you had been me, you would have done just as I did. What reason have you then to cavil?

⁵One rod equals 5.5 yards or 16.5 feet. Throughout his memoir Martin uses the rod as a standard unit for measuring distances. In this situation, he estimated the length of the chase at 165 to 220 yards, or roughly the length of two football fields.

Chapter II

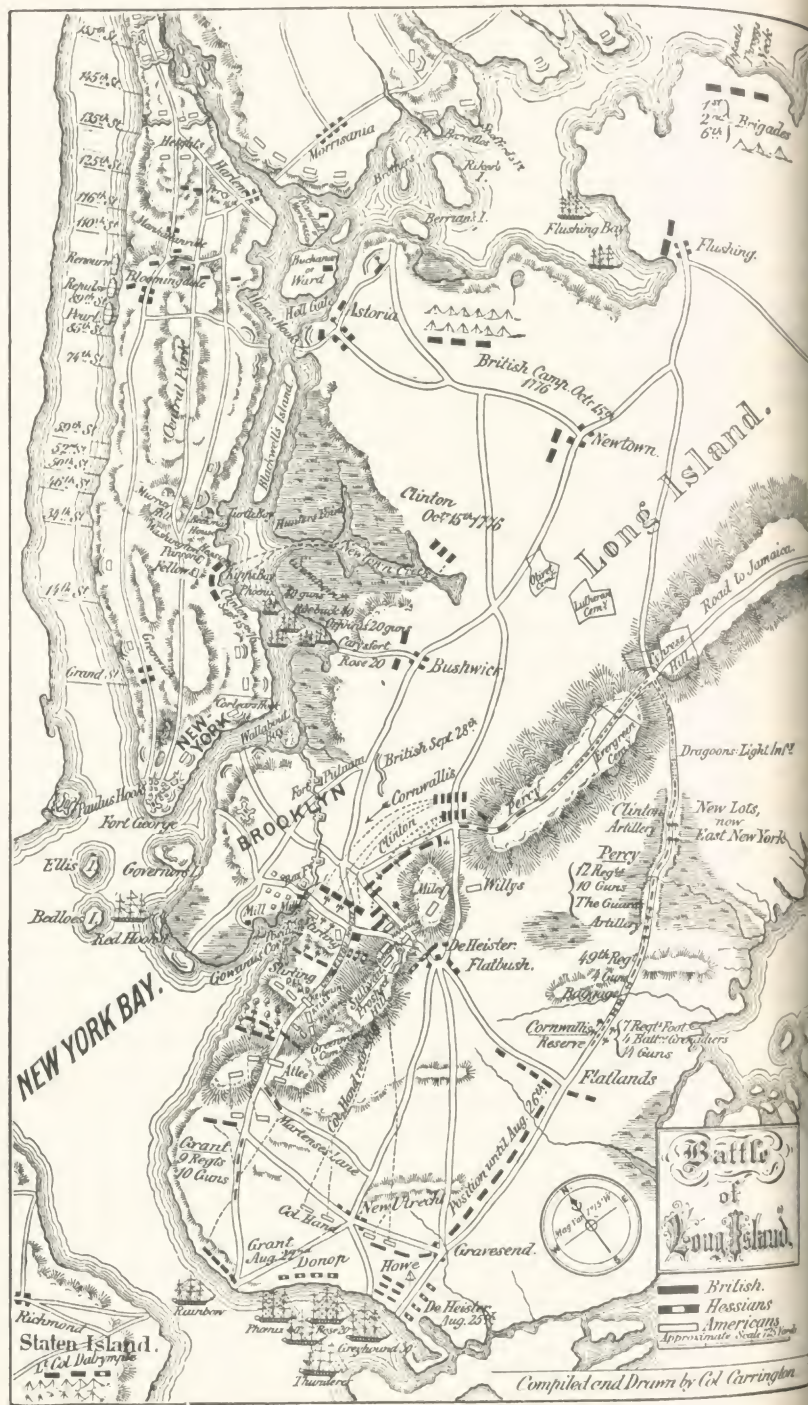
CAMPAIGN OF 1776

*At Uncle Joe's I liv'd at ease;
Had cider and good bread and cheese;
But while I stay'd at Uncle Sam's
I'd nought to eat but—"faith and clams."*

During the winter of 1775-76, by hearing the conversation and disputes of the good old farmer politicians of the times, I collected pretty correct ideas of the contest between this country and the mother country (as it was then called). I thought I was as warm a patriot as the best of them; the war was waged; we had joined issue, and it would not do to "put the hand to the plough and look back." I felt more anxious than ever, if possible, to be called a defender of my country. I had not forgot the commencement affair that still stuck in my crop; and it would not do for me to forget it, for that affront was to be my passport to the army.

One evening, very early in the spring of this year, I chanced to overhear my grandma'am telling my grandsire that I had threatened to engage on board a man-of-war. I had told her that I would enter on board a privateer then fitting out in our neighborhood; the good old lady thought it a man-of-war, that and privateer being synonymous terms with her.¹ She said she could not bear the thought of my being on board of a man-of-war; my grandsire told her that he supposed I was resolved to go into the service in some way or other, and he had rather I would engage in the

¹The terms were not synonymous. Men-of-war, or warships, were heavily-armed naval vessels. In the pages that follow, Martin references a number of warships belonging to the British Royal Navy. Privateering vessels, by comparison, were privately-owned and operated by special commissions, or letters of marque, normally granted by the Continental Congress. So long as the war continued, such commissions permitted privateers to run down and capture enemy craft, especially merchant ships carrying supplies to British land forces in America. As such, privateering represented legalized piracy, since captured vessels and goods could be sold as prizes, in turn netting handsome profits for owners, captains, and crews. The lure of quick wealth caused many a young person like Martin to consider becoming a privateering crew member, and more than 10,000 patriots did so before the war was over.



which, while we lay in New York, was not bad: If there was any deficiency it could in some measure be supplied by procuring some kind of sauce, but I was a stranger to such living; I began soon to miss grandsire's table and cellar. However, I reconciled myself to my condition as well as I could. . . .

I would here, once for all, remark that as I write altogether from memory, the reader must not expect to have an exact account of dates, I mean of days and weeks; as to years and months I shall not be wide from the mark.

And as I have entitled my book "The Adventures, &c., of a Revolutionary Soldier," it is possible the reader may expect to have a minute detail of all my adventures. I have not *promised* any such thing; it was what belonged to me and what transpired in my line of duty that I proposed to narrate. . . . I never wished to do anyone an injury through malice in my life; nor did I ever do anyone an intentional injury while I was in the army, unless it was when sheer necessity drove me to it, and my conscience bears me witness that innumerable times I have suffered rather than take from anyone what belonged of right to them, even to satisfy the cravings of nature. But I cannot say so much in favor of my levity that would often get the upper hand of me, do what I would; and sometimes it would run riot with me; but still I did not mean to do harm, only recreation, reader, recreation. I wanted often to recreate myself, to keep the blood from stagnating. . . .

I remained in New York two or three months, in which time several things occurred, but so trifling that I shall not mention them; when, sometime in the latter part of the month of August, I was ordered upon a fatigue party. We had scarcely reached the grand parade when I saw our sergeant major directing his course up Broadway toward us in rather an unusual step for him. He soon arrived and informed us, and then the commanding officer of the party, that he had orders to take off all belonging to our regiment and march us to our quarters, as the regiment was ordered to Long Island, the British having landed in force there.⁴

⁴Having fared poorly in the early days of the war, England's leaders planned a gigantic campaign effort for 1776. The goal was to crush the rebellion in one campaign season. Besides sending about 10,000 troops to Quebec Province in Canada to drive off a patriot invasion force, the king's ministers provided for a massive concentration of troops in the vicinity of New York City. The bivouac point was Staten Island, where General William Howe, having retreated to Halifax, Nova Scotia, arrived with nearly 10,000 troops in mid-June. Two months later the British had 32,000 well-trained soldiers ready to strike at the patriots, besides 13,000 sailors who manned 70 naval vessels and 370 transport ships.

By comparison, Washington had 28,000 troops on his muster rolls but only 19,000 actually present and fit for duty, and most of them were untrained amateurs like Martin. Just as bad, because of its many waterways New York was virtually indefensible, especially since the British could use their vast naval resources to strike wherever they pleased. To protect New York City, Washington divided his forces by placing roughly 7,000 troops,

diers. Many I have myself seen, vile enough to say that they never deserved such favor from the country. The only wish I would bestow upon such hardhearted wretches is, that they might be compelled to go through just such sufferings and privations as that army did; and then if they did not sing a different tune, I should miss my guess.

But I really hope these people will not go beside themselves. Those men whom they wish to die on a dunghill, men who if they had not ventured their lives in battle and faced poverty, disease, and death for their country to gain and maintain that Independence and liberty, in the sunny beams of which they, like reptiles, are basking, they would, many or the most of them, be this moment in as much need of help and succor as ever the most indigent soldier was before he experienced his country's beneficence.

The soldiers consider it cruel to be thus vilified, and it is cruel as the grave to any man, when he knows his own rectitude of conduct, to have his hard services not only debased and underrated, but scandalized and vilified. But the Revolutionary soldiers are not the only people that endure obloquy; others as meritorious and perhaps more deserving than they are forced to submit to ungenerous treatment.

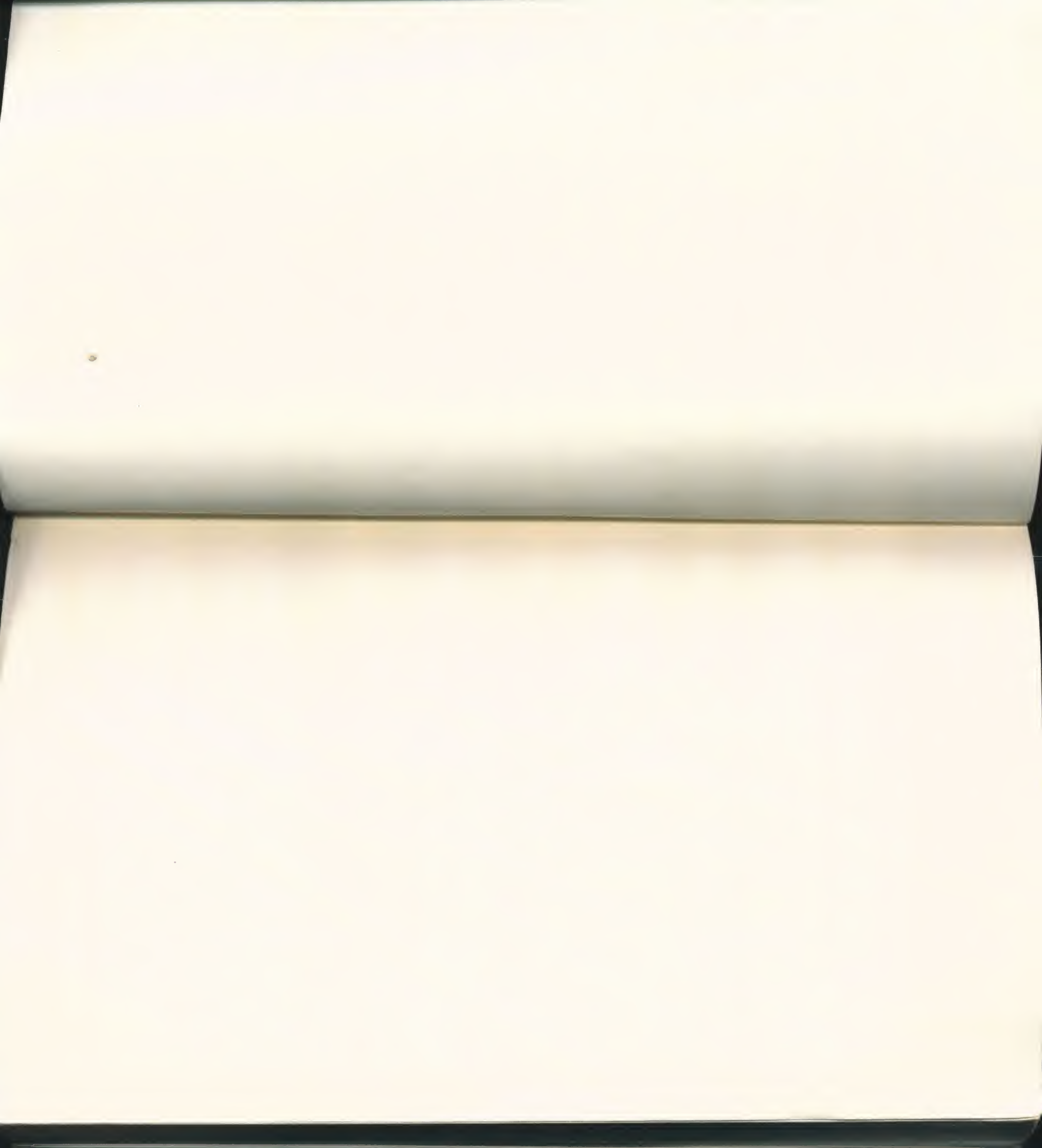
But if the old Revolutionary Pensioners are really an eyesore, a grief of mind, to any man or set of men (and I know they are), let me tell them that if they will exercise a very little patience, a few years longer will put all of them beyond the power of troubling them, for they will soon be "where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest."

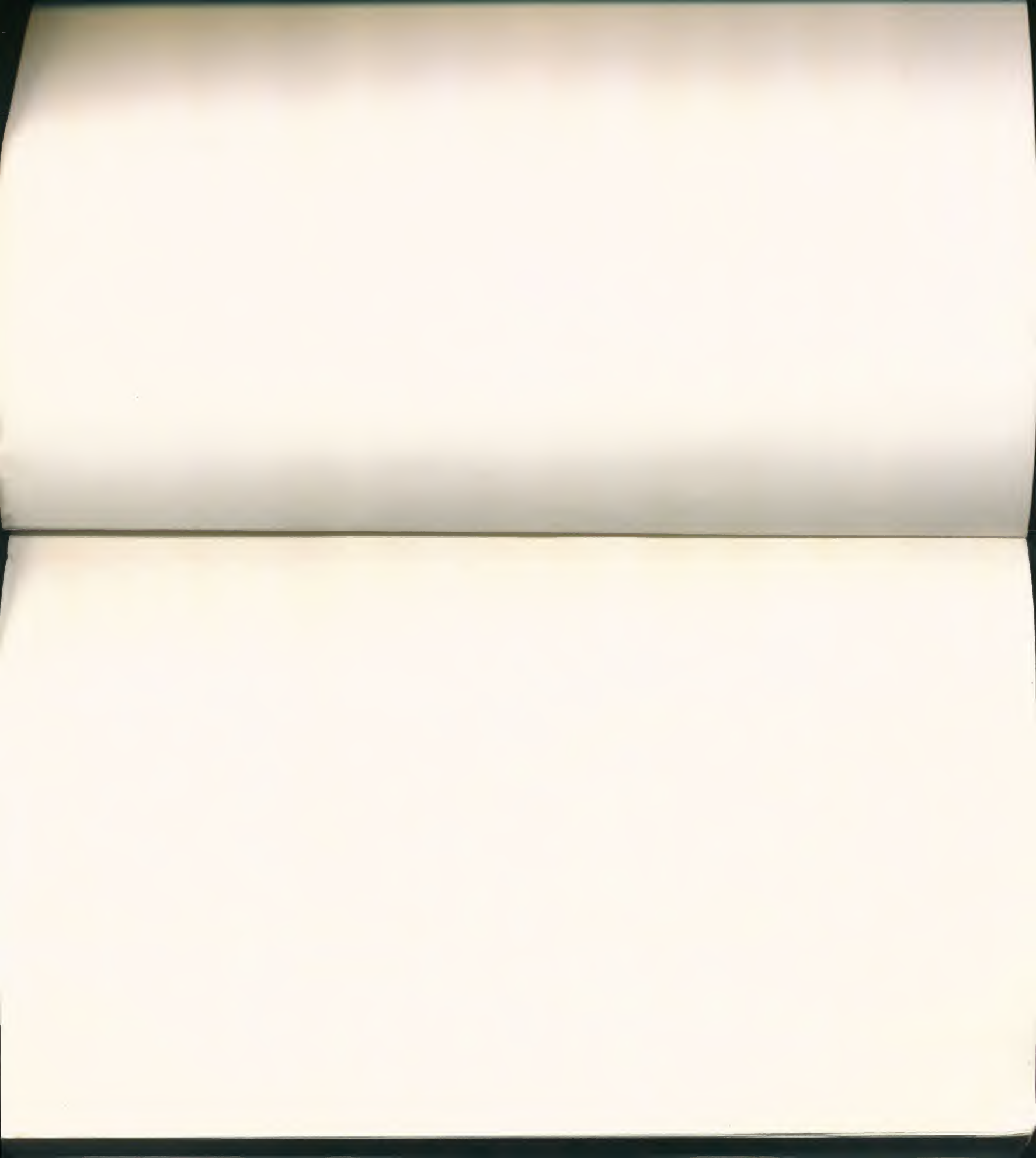
And now I think it is time to draw to a close (and so say I, says the reader). In truth, when I began this narrative, I thought a very few pages would contain it, but as occurrences returned to my memory and one thing brought another to mind I could not stop, for as soon as I had let one thought through my mind, another would step up and ask for admittance. And now, dear reader, if any such should be found, I will come to a close and trespass upon your time no longer. . . . But if you have been really desirous to hear a part, and a part only of the hardships of some of that army that achieved our Independence, I can say I am sorry you have not had an abler pen than mine to give you the requisite information.

To conclude. Whoever has the patience to follow me to the end of this rhapsody, I will confess that I think he must have almost as great a share of perseverance in reading it as I had to go through the hardships and dangers it records. And now, kind reader, I bid you a cordial and long farewell.

*Through much fatigue and many dangers past,
The warworn soldier's braved his way at last.*

THE END





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